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AUTHOR Schmidt, Ken
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ABSTRACT

The use of picture line-up activities, classroom exercises in which students must place a series of pictures in correct order, is discussed. The advantages of use of a picture series instead of simple pairs are examined, a basic activity is described, and ideas for implementation, adaptation, and follow-up are outlined. The basic activity uses 15-20 numbered pictures, cards with corresponding numbers, and an arrangement of student questioners and clue-givers in small groups that attempt to order the pictures, either competitively or cooperatively. Suggested classroom techniques include a practice round for understanding of the procedures, team structuring, feedback periods following each round, and criteria for picture selection and presentation. Some variations on the basic activity are offered, including an informant/detective game, a travel/geography exercise, identification of rooms in a house, speculation about people, and discussion of relationships between people. Possible follow-up activities include additional readings, classroom discussion extending the theme, and descriptive or explanatory writing exercises. Contains 19 references. (MSE)

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Optimizing Picture Activities for the Language Classroom: Picture Line-up Activities

Ken Schmidt

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Ken Schmidt

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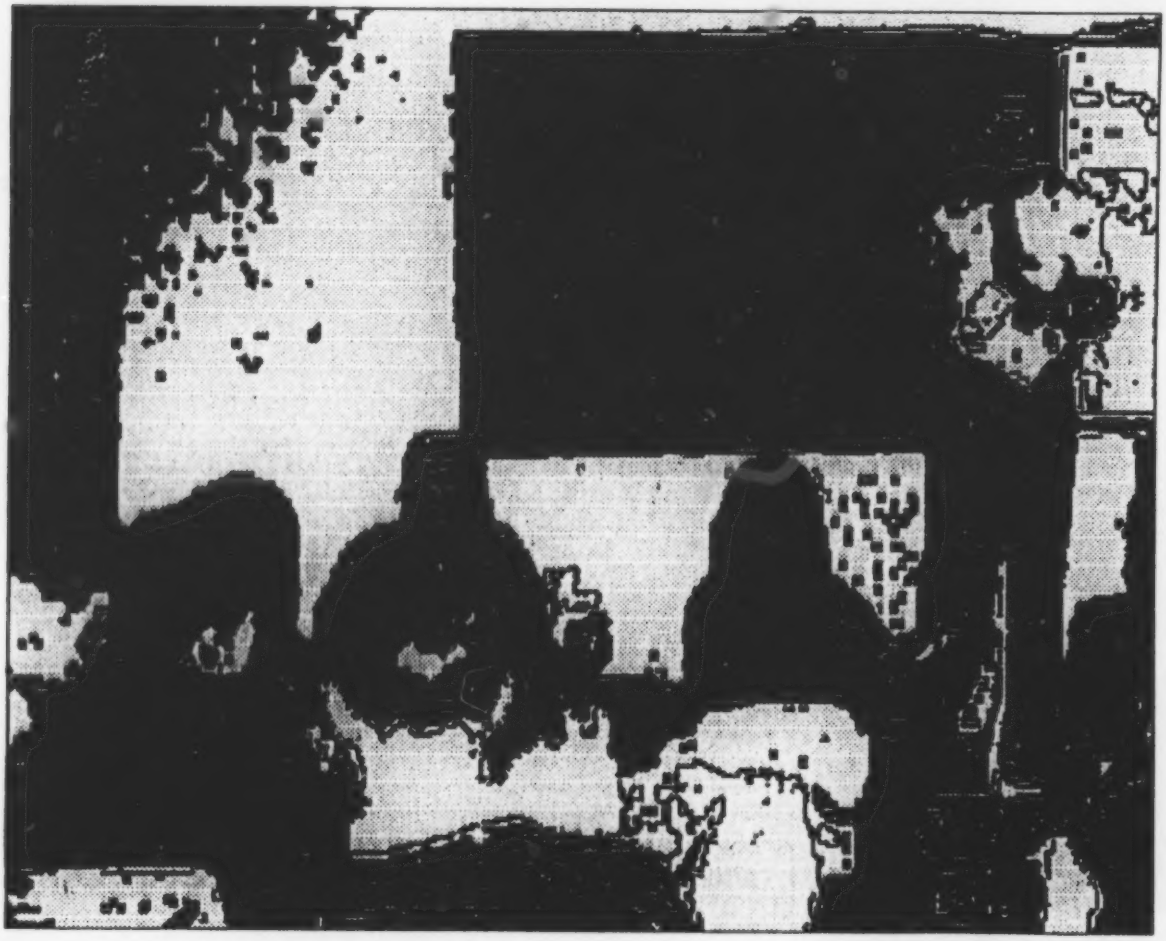

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Optimizing picture activities for the language classroom: Picture line-up activities

Ken Schmidt
Sendai Shirayuri Gakuen, Sendai, Japan

ANY LANGUAGE TEACHER'S arsenal of materials is likely to include a collection of pictures and images, and a rich variety of communicative classroom activities utilizing these have been developed (Jones & Kimbrough, 1987; Ur, 1988; Wright, 1989). Following are just a few of the ways pictures contribute to the classroom language learning experience:

- Images extend the classroom out to the "real" world, even to other lands and cultures (Wright, 1989).
- Pictures stimulate our curiosity. We naturally wonder about the people and places depicted in them.
- Pictures are also intriguing because we learn something from each one; we pick up some piece of information about a place, a style of clothing, someone's life (Wright, 1989).
- Visual images support language use and communication. They give us something to talk or write about. They stimulate ideas, convey information that can be shared, and remind us of our own background knowledge (Stevick, 1986; Ur, 1988) (e.g., "I could mention his hair style, how kind she looks, the color of the sand on the beach, how polluted the air seems. This picture reminds me of...").
- Comprehension and retention of new language are supported through association of this language with these images and the personal experience and knowledge they bring to mind (Stevick, 1986; Ur, 1988).
- Pictures are easily obtainable and can be used to elicit, contextualize, or support almost any discussion topic or language point (Wright, 1989).

It is little wonder that language teachers are so often seen carting stacks of pictures to and from class. However, the mere presence of an intriguing visual aid does not ensure the success of an activity as a stimulus to interaction or opportunity for learning (Byrne, 1986). Activities must be designed to effectively exploit these materials in a particular situation, with a particular group of learners—considering their backgrounds, interests, and needs for linguistic and procedural support (Helgesen, 1990).

In this article, we will consider a number of factors involved in this optimization of picture activities by first looking at a common picture description activity, examining a few potential shortcomings, and then going on to focus on a suggested improvement—the Picture Line-Up Activity—and its use in promoting communication and learning in the language classroom.

A common picture activity: Describing pictures in pairs.

Basic task

In this activity—a variation on Wright's (1989, pp. 42-43) "Describe a picture" and "Guess what and where" activities—Partners A and B are each given (or select) a folder containing a picture of a person, situation, or place/scene. A asks questions to elicit a description of B's picture and B in turn elicits a description of A's picture. The instructor then collects all the pictures (partners still have not seen each others' pictures), mixes them up (possibly during a coffee break), and sets them out along the chalk tray and/or on desks (along with distractor pictures if needed). Students proceed to find their partners' pictures based on the descriptions they received. If students have difficulty, they may ask more questions of their partners until they are sure they have picked the right ones. The activity ends with students confirming that they have, indeed, made the correct selections, and together, as a class, reviewing what information/language was most helpful in making their identifications.

Context for the activity

Many classroom activities are set in a situational context (e.g., buying a car, deciding what to do this weekend) involving roleplay or simulation. The context for this activity, however, may simply be "doing a game-like activity." The task itself is typically intriguing enough that it becomes momentarily unimportant that learners are studying English; they can imagine enjoying the activity outside of class, even in their own language (Helgesen, 1990). As such, the activity may elicit very satisfactory interaction without any further contextual support. Alternately, the context can involve roleplay—for example, describing a blind date, a business contact, or a long lost relative your partner will need to find in a crowd. This option

has an advantage in that the game-like aspect is still present, but now an interesting situational context supports the activity in the following ways:

- It helps the instructor define what language needs to be stressed (i.e., the language needed to accomplish a specific function (such as description) may vary strongly with the social context it occurs in (Richards, 1990)).
- It helps learners access background knowledge related to the context, thus supporting their efforts at communication (Oller, 1979; Richard-Amato, 1988).
- It helps learners make stronger connections between language and situation, thereby facilitating retention and later appropriate use of language in similar situations (Oller, 1979; Omaggio-Hadley, 1993; Richard-Amato, 1988).

Shortcomings: It is a good activity, but...

The activity above has been very helpful and enjoyable for my students and I continue to use it with various adaptations in numerous classes. The open-endedness of the task is particularly attractive, allowing students to control their own approach to the problem and complete the task at whatever level their present abilities allow (Ellis, 1992). However, several weaknesses soon become apparent.

First, Partner A has ready visual support for answering questions about her/his picture, but B, staring at the blank exterior of a folder, has little support for asking them. S/he has little to help stimulate ideas or cue needed vocabulary. Under the pressure of performance, even obvious questions may escape and long, torturous pauses result. Groups sometimes finish quickly, not because they have exhausted the potential of the activity, but because they have simply run out of ideas.

You can go a long way toward correcting this problem by running a strong pre-activity demonstration including a variety of creative questions that will help supply students with needed ideas and offer a vision of what they can do with the activity. You can also help avoid premature finishing by putting two to four pictures in each folder. Enough tasks are thus available that even the slowest pairs get a fair amount of practice before the quickest or least imaginative groups finish all their pictures. However, the problem of lack of visual support for the questioner still remains.

A related difficulty involves the goal toward which learners are interacting. Key factors in interaction that facilitates acquisition are opportunities to negotiate communication problems (Allwright, 1984) and modify interaction (Doughty & Pica, 1986). To maximize negotiation and modification in the context of pair and group work, students must be motivated to sustain communication toward a specific goal, such as solving a problem or completing a task (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Taylor, 1987). This continual restructuring of interaction until mutual understanding is reached is an important contributor to moving beyond "current interlanguage receptive and expressive capacities" (Pica, 1987).

In the activity described above, there is a clear goal, but realization of that goal is delayed until the second stage of the activity (when pictures are laid out for selection). During the first stage, participants know what their goal is (to select the correct picture), but have no way of knowing if they have shared enough information to be successful until they actually see all the pictures and try to select the one(s) their partners have described to them. Lacking a way to gauge successful completion, there is nothing inherent in the first stage of the task driving learners to sustain communication and take part in the negotiation and modification that appear so critical to acquisition. Students are thus left to their own impressions of what constitutes sufficient exchange of information. This is another reason the activity may at times bog down, as numerous pairs settle for much less exchange than is actually needed. Of course, in the second stage students again have opportunities to interact with a more immediate goal, but would it be possible to have this in effect throughout the whole activity?

The third difficulty arises during feedback following the activity. Some students may eagerly attend to what language/information was helpful to other groups, but others, not having worked with the images in question, may have little interest in what other groups did, and thus may not make full use of the learning opportunities set up by the activity.

Picture Line-Up Activities

Picture Line-Up Activities are in part an answer to these difficulties and the questions they elicit:

- How can I provide both questioner and answerer with visual support for their communication while still preserving the information gap so crucial to communicative activities (Nation, 1989)?
- How can I give learners a ready way to gauge their success, right from the beginning of the activity?
- How can I help more students develop greater involvement in feedback time?

Below is a description of the basic activity; along with ideas on implementation, adaptation, and follow-up.

Basic activity

In Picture Line-Up Activities, 15-20 numbered pictures are lined up along the chalk tray (with numbers written above each picture on the chalkboard) and used as common cues/stimuli by student teams in various description/clue-giving tasks. Figure 1 shows a typical classroom arrangement.

Placed behind each team of three is a shuffled stack of cards with numbers corresponding to the

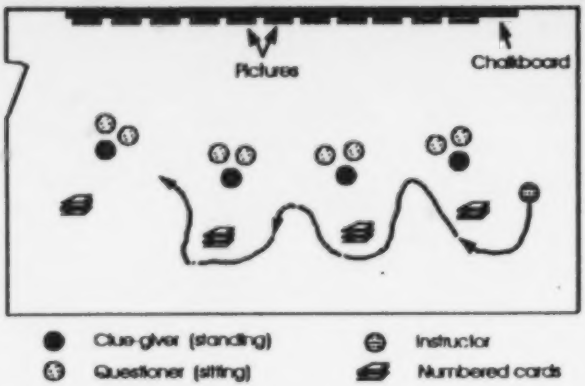

Figure 1. Classroom Setup

pictures. One player (clue-giver) takes a card and stands behind her/his partners (questioners) who are seated facing the chalkboard. No eye contact is allowed between standing and seated players to avoid "giving away" the answer. Seated players ask questions to discover which picture matches the number held by the standing player. In this way, all participants—clue-givers and questioners—have access to visual cues for communication, and are immediately able to gauge their success or failure. Questioning can focus on a wide range of themes, e.g., description, speculation on lifestyle/personality/ability, or tourism. To prevent random guessing—"Is it #16? Is it #5? Is it #10?"—teams are allowed only one guess at a number. Questioners must thus keep asking questions until they are sure they are right. If they guess correctly, the team keeps the card, one of the seated players goes to get the next card, the former clue-giver takes a seat, and the process begins again. If the guess is wrong, the card is returned to the stack and the process begins again. Play ends when one team collects all the cards or time runs out. Teams can compete with each other or can collectively try to beat their previous record or a teacher-designated number.

Setting up the activity—demonstration/elicitation

To begin, the instructor briefly introduces the game and leads a demonstration with the whole class playing as one large team (instructor = clue-giver, students = questioners). As the students ask questions, the teacher jots many of their ideas on the board (Fig. 2) and elicits language, when needed, through motions and hints.

Together, the class walks through several examples, cooperatively building a body of linguistic support (on the board) for the real thing to come (Helgesen, 1990). With the teacher helping alert the group to creative, innovative strategies, students get a glimpse of the activity's potential and can really run with the ball when they start.

This is a critical point. As a teacher, I may spend hours developing an activity. How can I then expect students just confronted with it to see the same potential for interesting, creative interaction? Beyond simply preparing students to complete the activity in minimal fashion, a cooperative time of elicitation/demonstration allows students to access the instructor's vision for the activity and develop their own as well. Working together to develop needed language and strategies contributes to a sense of joint ownership of the activity (Crookall & Oxford, 1990) and to the cooperative spirit desired in the actual playing of the game.

Approaches to elicitation

Depending on your purpose for the activity, you can vary the way you elicit ideas/language from the students during the demonstration/elicitation time:

- Prescribe language points (structures, functional language) for extensive repetition (e.g.,

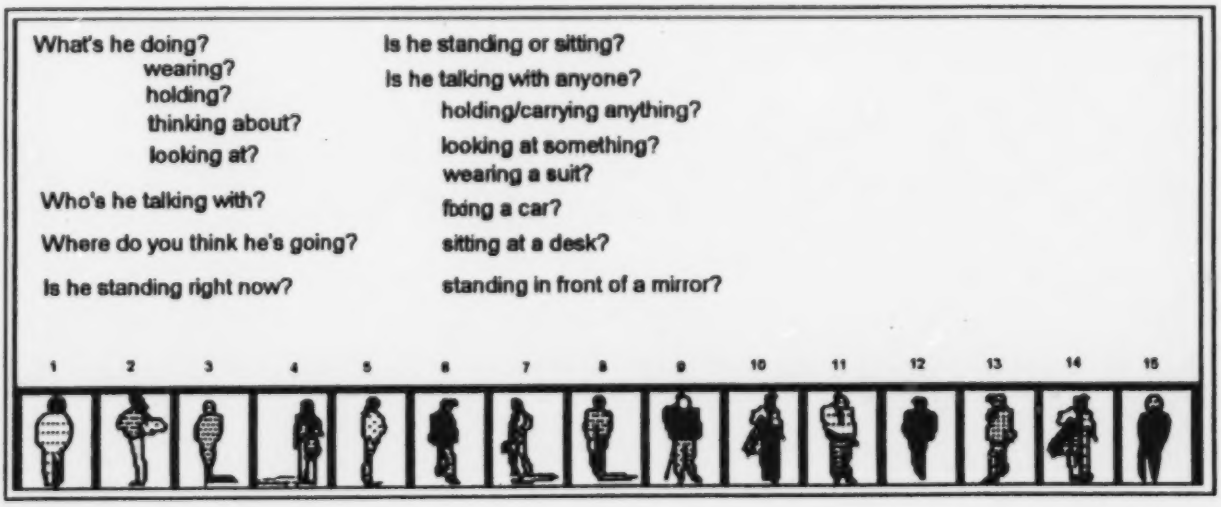
What's he doing?
wearing?
holding?
thinking about?
looking at?
Who's he talking with?
Where do you think he's going?
Is he standing right now?
Is he standing or sitting?
Is he talking with anyone?
holding/carrying anything?
looking at something?
wearing a suit?
fixing a car?
sitting at a desk?
standing in front of a mirror?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

Figure 2. Chalkboard Setup

6

all questions must contain -ing forms: "Is she eating a donut?").
- Create a context which naturally elicits the target language (e.g., detectives interviewing an informant—extensive work with past forms: "What was he doing when you saw him?").
- Steer the demonstration toward the desired target language without overtly specifying it. Other language will come out in the demonstration, as well, but the target language is on the students' minds and they are likely to use it if it is within their ability and they see a need for it (Ellis, 1992).
- Leave things completely open with communicative need alone dictating language use. Go in any direction that seems profitable, accepting any idea that makes sense.
- If you find students asking the same question over and over again (e.g., "What's she doing?") or concentrating on only one aspect (e.g., physical appearance) at the expense of other target areas, you may decide to ban certain question types to promote greater variety.

Final run-through

After doing several examples, have one team walk through it again, going through the movements and enforcing the rules (e.g., only one guess, no eye contact with clue-giver) as a final check on understanding. This may not be needed the next time you do a similar activity with the same group.

Structure of teams

Clue-givers can give unsolicited clues, but two-way interaction is encouraged if they are only answering questions from teammates. Whichever way it is done, the side with the more difficult task can have more people. For the activities presented here, I typically find the task of questioning to be the more difficult or time consuming of the two, so two questioners and one clue-giver seem ideal. While one questioner asks a question, the other listens and formulates her/his own, often building off of her/his partner's. Playing off of each other in this way, two groups of three can often produce as much or more language in a given time than three pairs.

Feedback

I find it useful to run this activity twice in succession, with a feedback period following each run. During feedback time, elicit useful language for interesting or difficult pictures. Highlight creative and helpful strategies used by students (ones that you may never have even thought of). Help students pick up the tools and pieces of language they needed. Students thus learn from each other and from you, filling a felt need for language (ideal conditions for effective input (Di Pietro, 1987)). It is good to hear, "Oh, that's how I say it!" "I should have asked that!" during feedback time and then see them "nail it" (use what they've learned) in the next go-round.

This highlights another feature of Picture Line-Up Activities. As *all* students deal with the same cues (pictures), demonstration and feedback based on *each* picture address the perceived needs of all students, not just the needs of those who happened to be working with that particular picture, as in the common pair description activity above.

Picture characteristics

The types of pictures used in any picture activity can have a tremendous effect on its success. Here are a few suggestions for selecting and displaying pictures for use in Picture Line-Up Activities:

- When using pictures of people, use all males or all females. Otherwise, 50% of the possibilities are eliminated just by saying "he." Do the activity with pictures of females, do some feedback, and then repeat the activity with pictures of males. Males and females may be together in a picture, but the questioner chooses an individual of the appropriate sex as the central figure.
- People pictures should be of *real* people. A picture of a doctor starts us thinking about what her/his day has been like, who s/he has just examined, what kind of specialty s/he is in. An obvious picture of a model posing as a doctor typically elicits nothing more than, "Oh, there's a model posing as a doctor." Pictures of models modelling clothes can be very useful if you are working with clothing vocabulary, but are difficult to speculate about, eliciting very little about lifestyles or personalities (Wright, 1989). However, overtly recognizing a picture as that of a model and speculating on what his/her life may be like may spark some good interaction.
- Include groups of similar pictures—two pictures of men with cats, three women on horses, two men coming out of a court house, four residential scenes, two mountain resorts, the interiors of three grocery stores. This forces learners to extend beyond simple, obvious questions to more sophisticated inquiry (thus pushing their language abilities (Ellis, 1992)) in order to be sure before guessing.
- Mount pictures on card stock for placing along the chalk tray or hang them from clips along the top of the chalkboard.
- When practical, have students supply the pictures. This allows students to make the activity even more their own, focusing on the people or places they are interested in—important factors in motivation and acquisition (Ellis, 1992).
- Shocking or controversial pictures (e.g., pictures of disaster victims) should be avoided unless your class (by mutual agreement) has a specific purpose for using them and you are prepared to spend the time necessary to prepare students for dealing with them in a profitable way.

Activity variations

As mentioned above, Picture Line-Up Activities are not limited to describing physical appearance or activity and can be adapted to accommodate a wide range of situational contexts and target language. Several adaptations that have been successful for me are discussed below.

1. Informant and detectives. In this variation, the instructor explains that the clue-giver saw the photo of a bank robber/drug kingpin (e.g., Maxine "The Terminator" McCauley) on television last night, and today saw him/her for "real" in the location depicted in one of the lined-up pictures. The clue-giver then runs to the police station to tell the police. To start each turn, the two "detectives" (questioners) from each team face the back wall of the classroom while the "informant" picks up a numbered card and goes up to the front chalkboard to closely examine the matching picture. S/he then runs back to her/his team, sitting down across a table from the detectives with her/his back to the board. The detectives turn around to face the informant and question her/him, trying to determine which of the people (pictures) s/he is trying to identify, e.g., "What was she doing when you saw her?" "Where did you see her?" "Was she with anyone?" "What was she wearing?" "What were you doing there?" The informant must answer completely from memory.

This context naturally elicits many past forms. Although far from realistic, at least the informant, who can no longer see the pictures, did see them in the past. If both informant and detectives could look at the pictures during questioning, even this shred of realism would be gone and using past forms would become purely a linguistic exercise. The more the context and structure of an activity support the use of the intended target language, the stronger the tie between language and situation that will be made in learners' minds and the more likely they will be able to use this language in similar contexts in the future (Oller, 1979; Omaggio-Hadley, 1993; Richard-Amato, 1988).

2. Pictures of places. Pictures of places offer many opportunities for interesting exchange.

- Unreal conditional travel: The clue-giver answers questions about what she or anyone could/would/might do/bring/eat if they went to the pictured place: "If you went there,what language would you hear?" "How long would it take you to get there?" This language is fairly natural simply in the context of playing the game, as few of the students will actually be planning trips to these places. The prize for the winning group can be an all expenses paid trip to the destination of their choice... "Sorry class, just kidding!"
- Intended travel: In this context, the clue-giver pretends to actually be planning a trip to one of the possible destinations. He proceeds to answer questions about what he is going to/will do/bring/eat when he goes to the pictured place: "What will you take?" "Are you going to go skiing?" "When you get there, what will you...?" "I might...."
- Geography twenty questions: Questioners elicit information about the pictured place. "Is it a city?" "How large is it?" "What's it famous for?" This variation on the twenty questions game has advantages over games that simply use paper cues labelled "New York," "Moscow," etc. Even students with little geographical knowledge can participate based only on what they see in the pictures, while more knowledgeable students get visual reminders that jog their memories (Byrne, 1986). Everyone has the pleasure of getting a little better idea about a number of places for having seen them.
- For all of these variations, pictures can be named (e.g., "Hong Kong") rather than numbered on the board. Students can thus guess, "Is it Jakarta?" rather than the relatively meaningless, "Is it #10?" In the same way, people pictures can be assigned names rather than numbers.

3. Identifying rooms. In this variation, players determine which room is being described: "Are there any paintings in the room?" "Is there a sofa?" "Where is the...?" "There's a grandfather clock in the back right corner"—a good opportunity to use "there is/there are" forms and prepositions of location.

4. Speculating about people. A rich area for the use of people pictures is the language of speculation. Questioners ask the clue-giver to speculate about the person in question, e.g., "Does she look like she's ..." "What do you suppose/think she does for a living?" "Do you think she...?" "She looks like she (might)..." "I think she..." "She could be a ..."

Besides using this activity to practice structures/functions, I have used it in an advanced adult class to help set up a discussion on first impressions and what contributes to them. The activity gets students interacting with each other, helps them begin thinking about how we make judgements based on appearances, and gives them a chance to flex some needed vocabulary and expressions before going into the next phase of discussion.

5. Picking someone out of a crowd. In this variation, teams pick spouses, friends, or criminals out of a crowd and get some practice with relative clauses, e.g., "Do you know my friend Sharon?" "No, which one is she?" "She's the tall one (who's) wearing the white mink coat." "Oh, is she #15?"

Follow-up ideas

The utility of an activity can be greatly increased as we discover ideas for follow-up and ways to link the activity with others. Below are several possibilities for Picture Line-Up Activities.

- Refer students to follow-up readings on particularly interesting characters or places seen in the activity. Preserving citations for pictures is especially useful for this. After spending time speculating on a person or a place, it can be very interesting to go read a text on that individual or place and then report back to the class on what the person is really like.
- As with the speculation variation above, use the activity to get the group interacting and introduce a topic or theme for following discussion or class work.
- Have students write short paragraphs or stories describing a person they have just talked about or speculating on the life of a person they have just discussed.
- Have students write a story linking four or more of the pictures appearing in the line-up. The Picture Line-Up activity, especially if it involves some speculation, gets students thinking about the pictures and considerably eases entry into the writing phase that follows.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to again highlight several key features of Picture Line-Up Activities that, in appropriate situations, represent advantages over the common picture description activity described earlier.

- All participants have access to visual support (pictures) while preserving the information/opinion gap so crucial to communicative activities.
- As there is no delay between discussion of each picture and its selection, learners can immediately gauge their success or failure. The drive to communicate until success has been achieved thus facilitates the sustained communication, negotiation, and modification that appear critical to acquisition.
- The large number of tasks ensures that even the slowest groups get lots of practice before the quickest groups finish.
- Because many tasks are available, students can, if desired, work on fairly limited language points. You may not be able to go on very long making "-ing" questions or speculating about one picture, but you can go on for quite a while if you are working with 15.
- As all students deal with the same pictures, demonstration and feedback based on each one address the perceived needs of all students, not just the needs of the students who happened to be working with *that* particular picture.

Of course, there are many situations in which the common picture description activity may offer compelling advantages, for example:

- when class size or a lack of time or facilities do not permit implementation of the more complex Picture Line-Up Activity,
- when the particular situational context or language function you wish to work on doesn't lend itself to practice with a Picture Line-Up Activity,
- or when the common picture description activity is used to bring needed variety to the classroom (Ur, 1988).

One of the pleasures and puzzles of language teaching is the continual search for ways to promote interaction and acquisition in the classroom. Pictures and images can be effective aids toward this aim, but do not in and of themselves ensure success. As we analyze our picture activities (or any kind of activity) in light of our purposes in doing them and our beliefs about language learning, we can continue to refine and optimize them for particular groups and situations. Picture Line-Up Activities are an outcome of this process and I hope that they will be of use to you as you piece together your own puzzle. ■

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